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CPYRGHT

Adventures of a Test Taker

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When Miss Zola refused to expatiate on the sex life of her parents, among other things, the doctors found that exceedingly odd and ordered her forthwith discharged

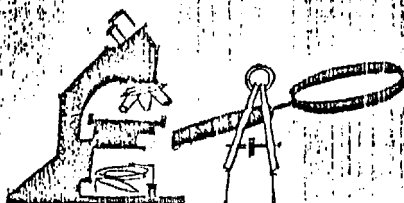
JOAN ZOLA

Do you like Alice in Wonderland? Do you believe in the second coming of Christ? These questions and hundreds like them, familiar to any freshman student who has worked with "personality tests," are being asked of prospective employees by certain federal agencies in Washington. Although the use of such tests is not yet as widespread in government as in private industry, it appears to be on the increase. It therefore behooves anyone who would enter our federal service to develop a psyche as normal, unrepressed, and cooperative as though it had sprung, full-blooming, from the forehead of Freud. The following is an account of the losing battle fought by one hopeful job applicant with an agency employing psychological techniques in filling its positions.

I applied for a position with the Agency, one of the largest in Washington, because it offered both the type of work and opportunity for foreign assignment which interested me, and for which I felt I was qualified by virtue of my academic training, knowledge of foreign languages, and experience gained from living and working abroad. After umpteen interviews, security checks, and tests designed to assess the various skills required for the job, I was given a medical examination which included psychological testing. The latter involved sitting several of us applicants in front of a battery of tests, including the well-known MMPI, which asks the questions cited at the beginning of this article. It seems to bother the psychiatric staff not at all that, as Martin Gross has pointed out in his excellent study *The Brain Watchers*, most of the tests they are using are now considered by experts in the field as utterly unreliable. However, having studied in college psych courses most of the tests I was faced with, I proceeded to answer

"right" answers to the probing questions. I was still sufficiently interested in the job to put up with the impertinent questions about my morals, sex life, and attitude toward God, especially since I was reasonably well-armed against them. The last "test" was composed of a series of questions each followed by an optimistically large space for essay-type answers. Having ascertained that they wanted details about my parents' private lives, my moral convictions, sex life (again), etc., I wrote a few one-sentence answers such as "My mother is a good mother," left the rest blank and closed the book.

What dismayed me most was that my fellow applicants were undaunted by the Agency's demand to know



what their mothers thought of their fathers. Far from refusing to betray their parents' privacy, they covered all available space with their soul-searching answers. They wrote in the margins. They asked for extra paper. My hope that they were writing fiction with which to convince the brain-watchers of their normalcy, was dashed by their comments to each other during the "test." "I'm having a hard time expressing how I feel about God," one boy said, sincerely, "I think I'm an atheist, but it's not settled for me." My question as to whether he thought the Agency had the right to know how he felt about God drew a blank stare. The question is simply not posed in their minds. They were doubtless already conditioned, as are so many young Americans, to answer questions by

spewing forth, "sincerely," the called-for details of their personal lives. Or perhaps they took seriously the statement printed on the face of each test booklet, that the information is required because "the doctor wants to help you."

Makebelieve Romance

This ordeal over, we each had a brief interview with the doctor, I clutching my blank test booklet. When asked why I had not answered most of the questions, I replied that I considered such matters to be none of the Agency's business since they dealt neither with my qualifications, nor with my loyalty, nor did they have any particular bearing on my moral character. The interview consisted mainly of long silences, punctuated by such remarks from the doctor as, "I see you're a Catholic. Do you ever hear voices, see visions?" He also wondered how I squared my moral principles with my sex drive, and how I fared romantically. To please him, I made up a romance which I placed, romantically, in Paris. It was tender, passionate, and a bit tragic, and by the time I finished I almost wished it had happened. The doctor sent me back to Personnel.

Several weeks later I was informed, somewhat to my surprise, that I had the job. The Agency flew me from my home in California to Washington, where I met my instructors and was ready to start training. Suddenly an ominous message came from the medical section: she didn't answer all the questions. Exasperated, I informed Personnel that if the job depended on answering questions which I considered offensive, I did not want the job. Personnel, which, it turned out, carries on a running battle with the psychiatrists to keep its qualified applicants healthy, replied that I must "toughen up" to weather the storm.

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and sent me off for a chat with another brain-watcher. Finding even less meeting of minds than the first doctor, this one retaliated with two fun-packed days of tests. Some of them I was sufficiently familiar with or could figure out well enough to give the right answers. But eventually they wore me down to the point where, asked what the most important thing in life is, I ignored the psychologically sounder answers of sex, money, and friendliness, and wrote out of spite, "Saving One's Soul." Then I knew I was lost. My complete lack of ability to draw elicited the doctor's plonking comment, "Hm. Difficulty depicting human beings, eh?" (It has been demonstrated, as Martin Gross again points out, that psychiatrists faced with drawings by artistically talented psychotics tend to classify them as normal, and normal people who can't draw as psychotics.) He also stumped me with the ink blot test. I was unfamiliar with it, due to some inexplicable oversight on the part of my college psych prof, for which I shall never forgive him. Being afraid to say what I really saw, I decided to stick with the story that each blob was a bug. (I learned later that this is Very Bad. Try not to see bugs, or, if you must, see lots of other things as well.) I still refused to answer the questions which I had previously found objectionable.

One-Up

This over, I saw still a third doctor, head of the department. We went through it all again: did I understand why they were doing this; what did I mean, the tests gave phony results, blah, blah. The doctor's voice rose steadily and at last he fairly shouted, so help me, "Would you have any respect for us if we let you get away with this?" Well, after the ink blobs and the drawing lesson I knew I wouldn't get away with it, but at least I had the satisfaction of making a psychiatrist lose his temper. If you can do that, you're one-up. (Of course, he had good reason. Where would be the power, the high salaries, the lavish budget of his department if people could be hired without making use of all those doctors, all those tests, all those couches?)

I should have lied cooperatively like everybody else, and persisted in trying to hire me. They and I thought I would do a good job, but then as it turned out from the psychiatrists' reports, we really didn't know me very well. When word came that I was Unacceptable, everybody was very decent about it. They kept me on the payroll for two months, offered to fly me home to California if I wanted to go, found me another job when I decided to stay in Washington. (The amount of money the whole thing cost the taxpayers pains one, but wasn't it worth it to have preserved the image of a well-adjusted Agency, free from surly dissidents harping on privacy?)

On my way Out, through numerous bureaucratic checkpoints, I was regaled with stories of similar clashes with the medical department. A secretary, for example, let it slip that she was interested in taking math courses in night school. She was called back and cross-examined as to why she wanted to be a man. (How could you be interested in a "masculine" subject like math and still be a properly adjusted female?) I was shown a large stack of personnel folders on people on their way Out of the Agency. The officer in charge of processing them remarked bitterly that the majority of these employees were leaving because of the psychiatrists' reports.

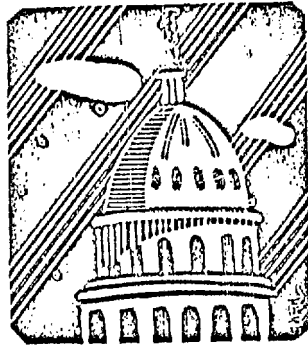
There is, of course, no agreement on whether the unfortunate people thus rooted out represent the wheat or the chaff. It is a fact that the testing department is firmly entrenched in the Agency and wields a tremendous amount of power. The strongest defense I found of the procedures used, even from the highly placed officials to whom I took my case, was

that they hoped they were doing the right thing. They all stated that they knew nothing of psychology and were therefore unable to pass judgment on the validity of the testing; only the doctors could do that. It is self-evident that, if the psychiatrists are to be the judges of their own work, their right to continued and probably expanded status, budget, and power cannot be questioned. Nevertheless, it must be questioned. Psychological testing practiced by the Federal Government on its present and future employees, and the resultant collection of voluminous files on their intimate lives, would seem to represent at least as much of a threat to the privacy of the individual as the use of such methods by business firms.

Security Risks

The argument that the sensitive nature of many federal jobs requires such probing to weed out potential security risks is relatively valid only if one accepts two premises. The first is a deterministic concept of man, which assumes that if sufficient data is learned about an individual's childhood, family background, sex life, etc., his actions may be reliably predicted. This is unacceptable to anyone who views man as more than a conditioned animal, since the tests completely ignore moral character and will, concentrating only on the subject's subconscious and on his attitude to himself. A man may pass every possible test of mental and emotional normalcy, and yet betray his country through weakness of character and desire for gain, or through conviction that Communism, for example, is a greater good for humanity. Unless one is willing to posit a priori that every Communist or potential defector is neurotic and hence may be spotted during personality testing, I cannot see that such methods can be justified as necessary to security. From a security standpoint, it would seem to be more relevant to scrutinize the subject's character through contact with people who have known him thoroughly, placing him in situations designed to test his loyalty and judgment, etc. There are still people in the Agency who successfully pass the psychiatric screening and then, as employees, develop neuroses, or crack

under the strain of a difficult foreign assignment. To which the psychiatrist replies that, in such cases, he did not have enough information to predict accurately; given more time, more tests, he would have been able to tell.



But he will have to do better than he has so far done to justify his methods. It can be safely assumed that there will always be something he does not know about a given person, which can serve as his excuse for not accomplishing what he tells us he is doing.

Are the Tests Reliable?

The second premise one must accept is the reliability of the tests. As many of them are based on work done with mental patients, it has been seriously questioned whether they are capable of giving any undistorted information at all about a non-psychotic person taking them. Others are based on such restrictive norms as to make them valueless for studies of people outside that narrow frame of reference. To elevate such highly questionable techniques to the status of final arbiter of hiring and firing of federal employees seems dubious at best, foolish and dangerous at worst.

The basic question, of course, is whether, under any circumstances, any employer has the right to the intimate details of his employees' personal lives. There is a certain point beyond which we may not go in violating the privacy of an individual, even if we say we are protecting our security or increasing our efficiency. We would, most of us, be repelled at the idea of brainwashing or drugging a job applicant to get every last bit of information out of him, even on the theory that it would

risks. We accept testing as "voluntary." Yet even psychiatrists admit that the questions asked on psychological questionnaires are cleverly designed to trap the subject into revealing subconscious attitudes and reactions of which he himself may not be aware. Is this so different from the use of "truth serum"? Is it not the right to privacy and indeed personality, which is really at stake?

These were the questions which my experience with the Agency raised in my mind. And so I resigned, to the considerable satisfaction of the "medical" department, and then I began like any normal malcontent to write this article.